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FINDING SACREDNESS IN THE PROFANE-- THE NIAGARA FALLS EXPERIENCE

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines one type of experience that is sought by those who go to resort and commercial recreation sites that capitalize on a unique natural environment. This study seeks to explain how Niagara Falls, as an example of a highly commercialized and exploited natural attraction, can provide visitors with a spiritual experience and, thereby, take on a sacred character. Site characteristics that contribute significantly and positively to these subjects' perception of Niagara Falls as a sacred site include its reputation as a 'must visit sometime in your life' destination. Niagara Falls is a traditional destination for honeymooners (first or subsequent), but it has a longer history and ranks higher as a significant nature pilgrimage site.

INTRODUCTION

The resort and commercial recreation industry relies heavily on the contributions of nature to the enterprising opportunities of humankind. Resort properties like Yellowstone Lodge, the Banff Springs Hotel, Kiawah Island, and Tahoe Lodge are worthy in themselves, but their attractiveness and guest appeal is derived from their spectacu-

lar or recreative natural settings. The protection of such natural settings is as important to the successful management of the resort as is the maintenance of facilities and the provision of quality services. Gartner (4) and Brayley (1) emphasized that the real product of a resort operation is not the buildings or the activities or even the setting. The real product is the experience enjoyed by the guest. However, the facilities, programs and natural settings influence the type of experience that the guest has while preparing for, participating in, and reflecting upon the resort stay.

This study examines one type of experience that is sought by those who go to resort and commercial recreation sites that capitalize on a unique natural environment. Among other benefits, Driver, Dustin, Baltic, Elsner and Peterson (2) identified spiritual benefits as possible outcomes of the experiences sought after by individual visitors to natural areas. Eliade (3) had earlier made reference to such benefits in the context of sacred space and sacred experience. By Eliade's definition, a sacred space is qualitatively different from common environments and is one in which an individual senses a cosmic centering. Similarly, the sacred experience entails a numinous manifestation of divine or 'wholly other' explanations for the way

things are. Miles (5) described sacred space as a place pervaded by a sense of power, mystery and awesomeness, not suitable for living in, but a place that, if you visit with 'full respect and a clean spirit, can lead to positive empowerment.

This study seeks to explain how Niagara Falls, as an example of a highly commercialized and exploited natural attraction, can provide visitors with a spiritual experience and, thereby, take on a sacred character. This study also identifies those site characteristics or managed behaviors that contribute most significantly to the perception of sacred space. Its relevance to the resort and commercial recreation industry lies in the opportunity with which the results of the study provide resort and attraction operators in facilitating sacred experiences, marketing spiritual benefits, and further justifying support for the protection of the special natural resource upon which the success of the enterprise is so dependent.

METHODS

Sample

Data for this study were collected in 1998 from a sample of 120 participants in a sponsored camp/tour of religious historic sites in northern Ohio and New York. Subjects were young women (ages 12-18 years) who were members of or associated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A day excursion to a touristic 'non-sacred site' (Niagara Falls, Ontario) was included in the tour itinerary.

Instrumentation

Subjects completed a three-part survey with pre- and post-tour elements. The pre-tour

element was administered while in-transit to the first destination. It included two sets of questions about the characteristics of a sacred site and the influence of environmental and behavioral management on the sacred experience. Without advanced interpretation or definition of sacred sites by the researcher, subjects were asked to indicate "how much you agree or disagree with the following characteristics of what you typically think of as a sacred site". A set of 22 statements such as "A sacred site is a place where something special happened" or "A sacred site is spoiled by the presence of people who don't think it is sacred" were then presented to the subjects. A second set of items was then presented to the subjects and they were asked to indicate "to what degree you feel each of the following required behaviors or restrictions would enhance your sense of sacredness of a special site that you may be visiting". Response options included 'greatly enhances', 'somewhat enhances', 'neither enhances nor diminishes', 'somewhat diminishes', and 'greatly diminishes'. The list of 22 conditions included "no admission to non-members", "do not take photographs/videos", "remove footwear", or "participation in prayer or ritual is required". The post-tour element utilized an open-ended survey instrument that solicited subject identification of sacred sites visited on the tour and assessment of those sites with regards to the degree of their perceived sacredness to the individual subject. After identifying each site visited and event attended that was "at least a little bit sacred", respondents indicated that they felt it was 'very sacred', 'quite sacred', 'a little bit sacred' or that they were 'still not sure' how sacred it was.

Analysis

Factor analysis was employed in data reduction, and multiple regression analysis was used in identifying predictors of the degree to which the respondents' various site experiences had a significant sacred or spiritual attribute. Data relating to the perceived sacredness and associated attributes of Niagara Falls were highlighted in this investigation.

Results

Factor analysis of the 22 items that were, using a 5-point strongly agree to strongly disagree scale, identified as characteristics of what the subjects typically think of as a sacred site resulted in 8 factors. They were labeled as Removed, Recognized, Constrained, Spiritual, Reproducible, Not profane, Uncommon, and Centering. The 22 items representing expected behaviors or behavioral restrictions that enhance the sense of sacredness of a special site were reduced to 7 factors. They were: Sacrifice, Communication, Physicality, Sociality, Maturity, Submission, and Purity.

Of the sample, 33 (31.1%) listed Niagara Falls as one of the sites visited that was, to some degree, sacred. Compared to those who did not identify Niagara Falls as a sacred site, these respondents collectively attached less importance to the requirement of keeping one's head covered (as a sign of respect/submission) (mean diff=.035, $p=.007$), having membership status or a similar qualification (mean diff=.205, $p=.010$), forbidding smoking at the site (mean diff=.758, $p=.758$), and actively discouraging profanity (mean diff=.902, $p=.012$). With 'degree of sacredness perceived' as the dependent variable, multiple regression analysis was used to develop a predictive model which included as signifi-

cant independent variables the following site characteristics: a peaceful place, where I feel closer to God, a place of worship, usually dedicated as sacred space, not necessarily tied to organized religious practice, and a place which people feel a need or desire to visit.

DISCUSSION

Site characteristics that contribute significantly and positively to these subjects' perception of Niagara Falls as a sacred site include its reputation as a 'must visit sometime in your life' destination. Niagara Falls is a traditional destination for honeymooners (first or subsequent), but it has a longer history and ranks higher as a significant nature pilgrimage site. Resort operators in the area, as well as providers of commercial recreation services in the Niagara region should consider emphasizing the 'must visit' or pilgrimage motivation in promotional campaigns. Also of significance in establishing a sense of sacredness in the Niagara experience is the desire for peaceful contemplation and worship. In spite of the popularity of the site and the crowded conditions at the falls, contemplative opportunity should be incorporated into the resort or commercial recreation product. The awe inspiring nature of the falls needs time to have its effect.

Site characteristics that have a significant but negative contribution are its lack of connection to organized religious practice, its formal dedication as sacred space, and its ability to make the visitor feel closer to God. The sacredness of the Niagara experience can be enhanced by helping visitors to place the experience within the context of their religious faith. In addition to (or, perhaps, in stead of) interpretive services emphasizing the 'man tames nature' aspect of the Niagara story, site and service managers could

facilitate and encourage recognition of the power, beauty and independence of Nature and its driving force. Native American as well as contemporary religious practice of a personal nature could be included in the Niagara experience.

The spiritual benefits of the resort and commercial recreation product are significant and worthy of management attention. The Aristotelian conceptualization of leisure

is based on opportunity for contemplation and connection to deity. Leisure today is marked by the pursuit of self-actualization, intrinsic motivation, and the escape from common, worldly obligations. Leisure is, in fact, more sacred than profane, and the quality and impact of the resort and recreation experience can, with a greater understanding of its sacrality, be advanced by the application of principles and relationships identified and explored in this study.

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Multiple Regression Model

Dependent Variable: Niagara Falls (degree of sacredness perceived)

Multiple R	.89128
R Square	.79439
Adjusted R Square	.73831
Standard Error	.29058

Analysis of Variance

	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square
Regression	6	7.17688	1.19615
Residual	22	1.85760	0.8444

F = 14.16622 Signif F = .0000

----- Variables in the Equation -----

Variable	B	SE B	Beta	T	Sig T
DEDIC	-.684609	.090536	-.938155	-7.562	.0000
GOD	-.350781	.093154	-.474794	-3.766	.0011
NEED	.219571	.088626	.258807	2.478	.0214
PEACE	.315307	.130736	.306767	2.412	.0247
RELIG	-.336423	.076596	-.570717	-4.392	.0002
WORSHIP	.353141	.077193	.525426	4.575	.0001
(Constant)	5.027945	.378657		13.278	.0000

This model accounts for almost 74% of the observed variance.